

**Network identity and religious harmony:  
theoretical and methodological reflections.**

A paper prepared for the conference on  
"Religious harmony: Problems, Practice, Education"  
Yogyakarta and Semarang, Java, Indonesia  
27.9. to 3.10.2004

**Abstract:**

In western tradition, identity has long been conceived of as something closed in itself, like a sphere or a globe. Samuel Huntington, for example, sees civilizations – or collective cultural identities – as closed units that are bound to clash as they meet. On the contrary, we conceive of identities as open networks of cognitive, emotional and corporal dispositions, acquired by individuals and collectives through socialization. Such dispositions enable people to perceive the world, to judge and to act. They are – in words of Pierre Bourdieu – operators of a practical logic and are based in the *habitus* of persons, groups or even whole civilizations. Such networks are constructed as open and dynamic, but also provide continuity; they have “thick” and “thin” areas, according to the significance of the area to the actor; they comprise any social field relevant to the actor. Moreover, this theory provides a method to empirically analyze dispositional networks of actors. Finally, the network model of cultural identity allows us to conceive of different cultures as distinct from one another and, at the same time, as having overlapping similarities. – The result: no clash of spheres, but similarities between networks. (Though circumstances prevented attendance, this paper was originally prepared for the IAHR regional conference on *Religious harmony: Problems, Practice, Education* Yogyakarta and Semarang, Java, Indonesia (27.9. to 3.10.2004).

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In the invitation to the present conference our hosts pointed to one of its focuses: to provide “ways in which various religions can exist harmoniously in the same community – whether local, national or international”.

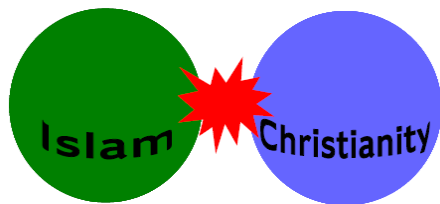
This focus has implications for the theory of religion in one of its crucial areas: the theory of *religious identity*. Nowadays there is much talk of the identity of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and so forth. As religions are getting closer together in space and time, everybody begins to think more of what he or she is and wants to be.

## 1. Sphere identity

“Identity” is a concept of western philosophy. Originally, it means that something is what it is, even as time goes by. (Aristotle: *tautotés*) “A” is “A”, and not “B”. Moreover, every thing and every person are a substance with an essence, which defines what this thing or person really is.

Even in modern philosophy and social sciences stability and continuity are focal points of the discourse on identity. “Diffusion” is seen as its main threat (Mead 1963, Erikson 1994). Today, with post-modern authors, things are beginning to change.

However, in the dominant tradition of western thinking the mental image of identity appears to be a ball, a globe, a sphere – something closed within itself and absolutely distinct from the other. One identity is hermetically closed over against other identities. When they touch, they clash or they merge into one: conflict or unity (oneness), nothing else.



In modern political science we have a well known example of this paradigm. All of you know that I am talking about Samuel Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations. Huntington conceives of civilizations – such as Islam or Christianity – as closed spheres, as hermetic globes.

As a consequence, the political imagination focuses on just one alternative: those globes can clash, or one of them can swallow the other and create a unified political system. So the only alternative to war seems to be unification.

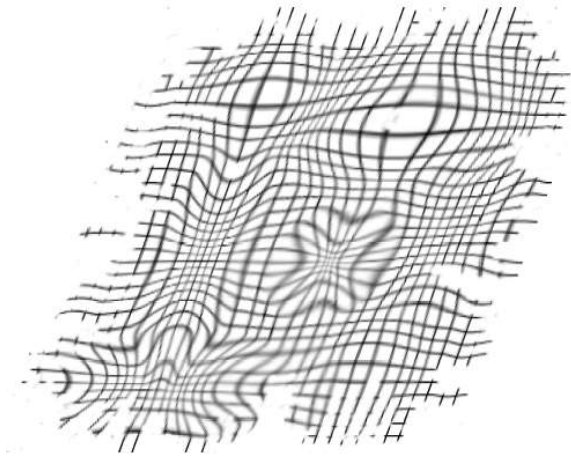
But harmony, the focus of this conference, does not mean unity in the sense of unification, I suppose. Therefore I am going to ask: Is there another possibility to imagine collective identity – be it cultural, religious or whatever?

## 2. Network identity – a first glance

I think it is very useful to imagine identity as a *network* of dispositions to perceive, to judge and to act. What does that mean?

First, let me say what I am *not* talking about: It is the well known observation that identities of individuals or groups develop in networks of social relations. I welcome this thought of course, but I point to something different. We are going to elaborate the idea that an identity in itself *is* a network, a network of dispositions.

So, we don’t think of identity anymore as something fixed and closed in itself, but as something open, dynamic, transforming throughout time and, nevertheless, relatively coherent and constant. We do not focus on substance or essence anymore, but on relation. And moreover: we offer a model to conceptualize identity this way and to describe concrete identities.



To accomplish this goal, it is useful to recur to the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1980, 1987, 2000). But in consideration of our schedule I do not go much into that theory now. I will simply use some concepts of it as I go further.

Everybody of us has had the experience of learning something new, a foreign language for example. First it takes some concentration and time to get into it. Then it becomes easier and easier. Knowledge and specific dispositions are building up. Finally, some of

us fall in love with that new language. It might even become something like a “second skin”, a kind of a second self that we are as we visit a country where that language is spoken. Then we even might behave differently, use other forms of politeness or joke in a special way. And sometimes we even transpose some manners back to our home culture.

That means, the other language has become part of our *habitus* – as Bourdieu would say –, even if it is not always prevailing. What happened here is that our cognitive, emotional and even our corporal dispositions have slowly changed. Some new dispositions have been added to our network while most of the older dispositions remain intact and *some* others might have withered.

According to Bourdieu such human dispositions are operating in the practical logic of cultures. But they do not stem from genius. They stem from socialization, from learning, from doing and from creating new practices in the context of society.

A network of dispositions is structured by the social conditions the actors are living in and it exerts effects back on such conditions; it interprets experience; and it generates the ways of perception, judgment and action of people. Identities consist of such networks of dispositions. They emphasize selectively a certain, significant set of dispositions in their network.

For sociological analysis and a sounder development of theory it is important to consider, how the dispositions are interconnected among one another.

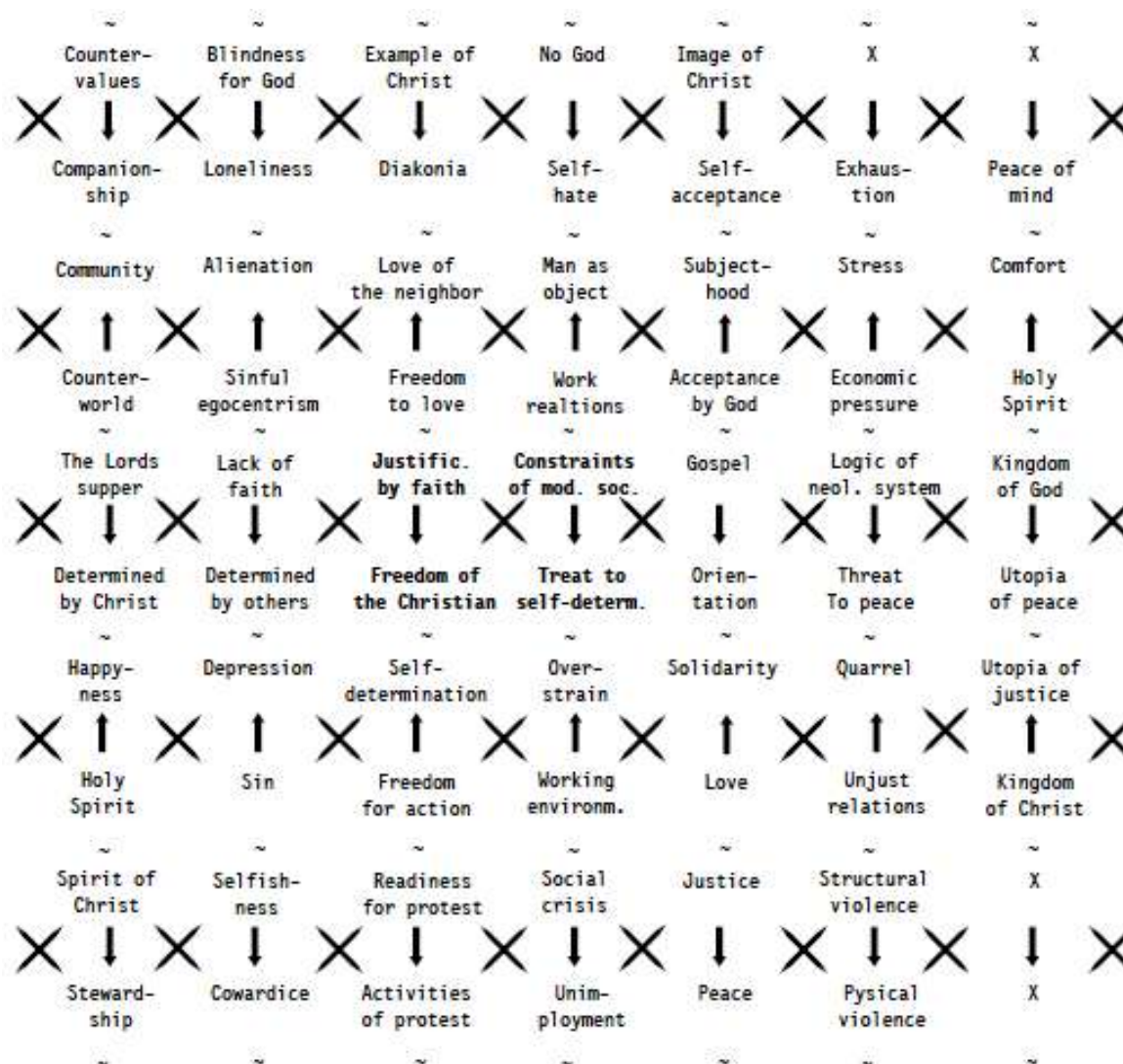
### **3. Network of dispositions – a methodological outline**

The dispositions are connected according to basic relations of practical logic. Everybody has experienced that black is something else than white; that from action follows reaction; that if I do “A” I cannot do “B” – and other things like that. What we do has its logic, in everyday life, in religion and anywhere else. So, dispositions depend upon one another according to the specific logic of the field of practice that someone acts in. Household is different from religion or politics. But any one has its logic.

There is an old model of basic logical relations (developed by Boethius in the VI<sup>th</sup> century and later used by some structuralists) that – with some modifications – allows for

analyzing cultural practices. It simply puts the logical relations of implication, contradiction and contrariety together. I cannot go into detail here, but I will explain what I mean as we go on with an example.

Instead of referring to a fundamentalist group – as announced –, I would like to stick to what myself and many of the German participants in this gathering are: liberal Protestants of social democratic tendency. Let me take this kind of species as an example of how to reconstruct the basic structures of a network of religious dispositions according to our model.



What is the situation many middle class Europeans feel to live in? We experience the constraints of modern post-industrial societies and sense them as a “threat to our self-determination”. Protestant theology answers this feeling preaching the “justification only by faith” through the pure grace of God. As a result of this, modern protestant Christians feel “Christian freedom” as a state of being relieved from those threats. This freedom offers strategies against the “constraints” in order to achieve “self-determination”.

As for the method, please let me say here: First, it is obvious how a certain way of perceiving a situation triggers judgments and strategies. Second, such a square of basic dispositions is nothing more than *one* little structure in a large network of dispositions.

Let's go back to the example: The term "freedom of the Christian" equals "self-determination". But the "justification by faith" means also a "freedom to love" that produces "love of one's neighbor". The "constraints of modern society" are being felt in the "working environment" that "overstrains" people and is characterized by "social crisis" and unemployment". The reaction of good Christians is "solidarity" and the struggle for "justice". The logic of the neo-liberal "capitalist system" develops into a "threat to peace", and "unjust economic relations" equal "structural violence" that generates "physical violence". All of this, as well, has to be countered by a struggle for "justice" and "peace". – So far the glimpse on the religious identity of European Protestant Liberals.

Of course, the idea of identity as a network is not limited to a particular culture or religion. I am convinced that also the Moslem audience can think of similar networks of dispositions in Islam. One might begin with social differences and a subsequent experience of material scarcity. The religious answer may be found in the precepts of Qur'an that enable a person to lead a righteous life and to cope with society. And from there a specific logic develops that contemplates the importance of fasting (*saum*), of regular prayer (*salat*), of saying the creed (*shahada*), of giving charities (*zakat*) and much more – everything connected by a neatly woven logic.

This brief sketch might be enough to show that the practical logic that links human dispositions to one another can be modeled as a network on the basis of empirical analysis. We do not go more into details here, since our question simply was: How can we imagine identity other than as globes, as closed spheres? We said: as a network. What consequences does this model have?

#### 4. Network identity -- theoretical perspectives

The dispositions, linked together by logical relations, can be imagined as a huge network. As human beings we share the experience that our knowledge and our desires are open, dynamic and – at the same time – fragile and never complete. Accordingly, the texture of the network model cannot be different.

- The network is *open*. Its borders have no hem, no seam. They can link to new experiences.
- The network's structures are *dense* in such areas, where the cultural knowledge is "thick" and detailed. Where the knowledge is "thin" and the practice irrelevant, the dispositions are wide or even nonexistent (a hole in the network).
- The network comprises all the *fields of action* that are significant for an individual, a group or a culture. Accordingly it is possible to detect different thematic areas in empirical networks.
- The structures can be very similar *between one field of action and another* or they can be very different. For example, some people say that a person has to obey to the preacher as much as to the political leader; but others believe that God and the emperor have realms with very dissimilar rules.

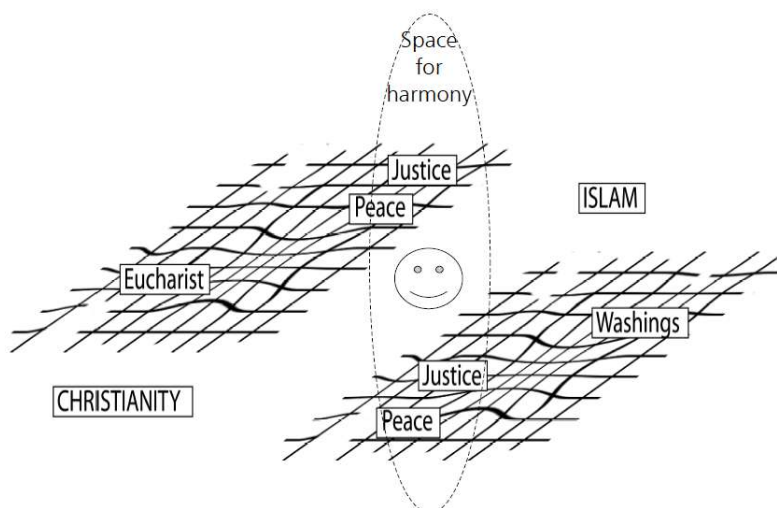
- The dispositions operate not only *cognitively* but also as *emotions and states of the body*.
- The network comprises *individual* dispositions as well as *collective* ones at the same time.
- And finally, the network model visualizes the fact that *changes* of certain attitudes never happen in an isolated manner, but always exert effects upon many other dispositions that they are linked with.

So, with the network model it is easier to understand how identities can change over time and, simultaneously, preserve continuity. Remember some occasion when you have met an old friend whom you had not seen for years. Many traits of his behaviour, his way to speak and his body might have changed; but others stayed the same. Thus, some dispositions are so central in his network that they do not easily change; others are marginal and lose significance; and, additionally, he might have achieved completely new ones.

It is quite the same thing with religions. While Islam or Christianity changed with the centuries, certain central dispositions stayed quite the same – only that the whole network around them has changed as well. So, the central dispositions are being re-interpreted under completely new circumstances. An example of an important process of change in Christianity is the reformation of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century: salvation was no longer associated with merit but with grace. Such processes of re-interpretation always are triggered by the social situation and always involve social struggles: as, for example in Islam, the interpretation of “jihad” or in Christianity the question if there is any such thing as “God’s own country”.

Today – as the world has become a small place – these struggles and impulses involve more and more different religions. If scholars of religion and politics keep on operating with sphere-models of identities, with the idea of clashes between religions and civilizations, it might not be all too easy for them to develop creative alternatives for our situation.

The *network* model of identity seems to serve much better the central question of this conference and of our time: How can various religions exist harmoniously in the same community, national or international?



If we conceive of different religions and cultures as networks, we can see them apart from each other, but – at the same time – similar to each other. We can understand each of them as open and dynamic ways of human practice. We can perceive each one with its special and unique features, as for example the ritual washings in Islam and the

Eucharist in Christianity. While these and many other features remain distinct without any need to “unify” or harmonize those differences, there is nevertheless a great chance to open the way to harmony.

The different networks do have similarities, and any careful analysis will show them. To give a simple example: both religions, Islam and Christianity, are interested in justice and peace. Even if these concepts might be interpreted in a different way within each network, the practical interest in peace and justice represents a space where harmony can grow. To let harmony grow is a task for people, for example for the scientific community. The network model of identity can be of some help to detect the opportunities for harmony a little bit better.

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